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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a model for assessing English speaking students with possible learning disabilities at a Spanish language immersion magnet school in St. Paul, Minnesota. The assessment process is based on established procedures for screening and assessment of Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners. Emphasis is on: (1) attention to appropriate pre-referral interventions; (2) the use of a variety of nondiscriminatory assessment procedures, including data gathered from home and classroom; (3) intellectual assessment, using primarily nonverbal tasks to evaluate the student's learning ability and problem solving approach; and (4) curriculum-based measures to assess a student's academic achievement using local norms. The process also considers such exclusionary factors as: high degree of absenteeism, lack of schooling, and discrepancies between school and home. Use of this ecological model of assessment has resulted in the identification of fewer students as needing special education services. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

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ASSESSING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY IN THE ELEMENTARY IMMERSION SETTING

By

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Assessing for Special Education Eligibility in the Elementary Immersion Setting

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This presentation shares the St. Paul (MN) Public Schools' model for assessing students with learning disabilities in the language immersion setting. The model is based on the district's commitment to comprehensive, nondiscriminatory procedures for referral and assessment of students experiencing academic difficulty. Well defined procedures exist for screening and assessment of Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners. These form the basis of the model for assessing students with educational difficulties in the district's Spanish and French immersion programs and include:

- attention to appropriate pre-referral interventions;
- the use of a variety of nondiscriminatory assessment procedures, including data gathered from home and classroom;
- intellectual assessment, using primarily nonverbal tasks to evaluate the student's learning ability and to understand how he/she approaches and solves problems;
- curriculum-based measures assess a student's academic achievement and the student's performance is compared to that of his/her peers using local norms.

This approach was adopted for a more fair treatment of English-speaking students in an immersion curriculum. Participants will gain an understanding of the assessment model, including history and current practice, warts and all. They will be able to implement a more holistic approach when evaluating second language learners.

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ASSESSING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION EILIGIBILITY IN THE ELEMENTARY IMMERSION SETTING

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Adams Spanish Immersion Magnet school has been operating in St. Paul since 1986. It is located in St. Paul, Minnesota's capital city and is the second largest district in the state. It is dedicated to helping children develop communication skills both in Spanish and in English, master subject area content and gain familiarity with another culture, for a broader view of our world. Adams has a total enrollment of 695 students; currently 49 students receive additional small group instructional support to address learning problems in seven different categories.

Language Acquisition Theory

Several researchers have studied second language acquisition. Medeiros-Landurand and Cloud (1991) have delineated four stages of second language learning. There is a "silent phase" where students concentrate on figuring out what the new language means. This is followed by early, tentative speech, using one or two word phrases. As the speaker becomes more practiced, his/her sentences become longer and errors decrease. Continued exposure and practice leads to end stage fluency. At this point, speakers are able to understand, debate, analyze and evaluate material in the second language with few errors (Medeiros-Landurand and Cloud, 1991), It is important not to confuse initial surface language proficiency, where speakers are able to communicate their needs and function in everyday life situations (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills/BICS) with higher level, deeper understanding needed for classroom learning (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency/CALPS). It takes up to two years to develop surface proficiency and up to seven years to acquire academic facility in a second language (Cummins 1984).

Researchers have also explored the conditions which facilitate second language learning. These include internal factors, such as self confidence, motivation and willingness to experiment, as well as external factors such as language rich environments which provide many opportunities for modeling real

life experiences(Krashen, 1982 and Wong-Fillmore, 1979).

Guidelines for Assessment of English Language Learners in St. Paul

The St. Paul Public School system (SPPS) is committed to comprehensive, nondiscriminatory procedures of referral and assessment of all students who may have educational disabilities and who are in need of special education services. Within the district there are well defined procedures in place for screening and formal assessment of Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners (LEP/ELL), which follow state and federal guidelines (SPPS Individual Educational Plan (IEP) Manager's Manual, Fall 2000).

Prior to formal referral, a number of factors are considered, including whether the student has had the opportunity to acquire the expected skills, the appropriateness of his/her instructional level and the success of intervention strategies which have been tried with the help of ESL/Bilingual resource staff.

When a formal referral is initiated, a review of the cumulative folder is done to gather information relative to the student's educational history. The school district's referral form is completed with attention to date of U.S. entry, home language, parent concerns and pertinent medical information.

The referral then goes to the Limited English Proficient/English Language Learner(LEP/ELL) Special Education Resource team. One of a team of trained special education interpreters is assigned to interview the parents to gather more specific information about the student. The school's concerns and the proposed assessments to be done are also explained.

Formal assessment of English Language Learners in St. Paul takes the point of view that it is important to establish proficiency in the student's native language as well as his/her rate of learning English. Trained bilingual speech/language clinicians, or English clinicians assisted by trained interpreters, use a combination of language sampling, story telling/retelling and standardized instruments to evaluate the learner in both languages. For English students, eligibility for special education service is determined if a significant discrepancy exists between the student's scores on standardized tests of intellectual potential (full scale IQ) and achievement (Regressed Standard Score Table based on the Frequency of Regression Prediction Discrepancy model; MN Department of Children Families and Learning, 1994). However, an ELL student's eligibility for academic special education service is determined by *curriculum based measures* of oral reading, comprehension, written expression and math. Student progress is compared to local district grade level norms, which are gathered every five years. Additional information is gathered through teacher interviews, classroom observations, work samples

and other informal procedures. (For more information on Curriculum Based Measurement, see chapter by Shinn et al., 1990)

Intellectual assessment is conducted by the school psychologist, using nonverbal tasks, selected as most likely to minimize possible bias. School psychologists not fluent in the student's native language are assisted by trained interpreters. Informal assessments, observations and interviews supplement information needed to evaluate a student's cognitive functioning.

Social workers and school psychologists collaborate to gather information and evaluate students referred for emotional/behavioral problems as well as those suspected of being mentally impaired. Motor functioning and other disability areas are evaluated by appropriate licensed district staff with the help of trained interpreters when necessary.

Adams Assessment Model for Spanish Language Learners

Early on, if a special learning problem was suspected, students referred for assessment were treated no differently from the general English school population. Despite the fact that their language of instruction was not English, eligibility for special education was based on the discrepancy model. The student's cognitive capability was measured using a comprehensive standardized test, including a verbal component. The score was then compared to the student's result on a standardized English achievement test. However, in view of the district's clear guidelines for English language learners, in 1993, the Adams School special education team began to question the validity of using English language tests to measure the academic standing of students schooled in Spanish. The team decided to treat the student in immersion as being in an instructional situation parallel to the ELL/LEP student. That is, a student whose first language is English, and whose language of instruction is Spanish, should be assessed using the same format as those students educated in the mainstream, whose home language is not English.

Thus, when a student at Adams experiences academic difficulties, the first focus is on *pre-referral interventions*, including curriculum adaptations and additional supports or strategies to improve the student's academic progress. This step is extremely important since the student's current academic problems may be caused by factors not intrinsic to the child, but related to second language learning. A "Teacher Assistance Team"(TAT) is in place to provide support for regular education teachers. Interventions are required to be carried out for up to six weeks. The success of the intervention is then evaluated to determine whether formal referral is appropriate. Special attention is paid to the characteristics of the second language learner. For example, students who are seen as "distractible," "depressed" or "self isolating", may be at a beginning

stage of acquiring the second language and therefore are not necessarily candidates for formal assessment (Hallberg, 1990).

If these interventions do not help the student improve academically, the formal assessment process begins. A variety of nondiscriminatory assessment procedures is used, including information from home and classroom. Language functioning is formally evaluated by the school's speech clinician. As is the case with English language learners, formal assessment of intellectual functioning focuses on process rather than product. The purpose is to discover the student's strengths and weaknesses in both the cognitive and academic realms. Are there prominent patterns which emerge in the cognitive realm which will negatively impact academic progress? As well, on the premise that it is not fair to test for material that may not have been taught, language-free measures are used to assess cognitive functioning. Selected verbal tasks may also be administered informally to gain information about verbal cognitive functioning. Finally, curriculum based measures are used to assess academic progress and the pupil's performance is compared to the progress of his/her peers, using norms gathered at the school site. It is important to note that all students formally referred are tested both in English and in Spanish to determine their functioning in both languages. Finally, in accordance with district ELL guidelines, assessment of first graders is considered premature and is therefore discouraged for LD referrals only.

Closing Statements

- A well established pre-referral process pays significant attention and looks for solutions to students' problems directly linked to factors of second language acquisition prior a referral to special education.
- During the Evaluation Summary Review (ESR) meeting, important consideration is given to exclusionary factors, such as: high degree of absenteeism, lack of schooling and the discrepancy between school and home.
- Overall, the current ecological model of assessment in use at Adams Spanish Immersion School identifies fewer students as needing special education services.

Future Projects

The current sequence of referral and evaluation has evolved over time, as a way to ensure the success of all students at Adams Spanish Immersion School. Outcomes are both qualitative and quantitative. We strongly believe that students are less likely to be falsely identified as needing special education services because of the importance placed on pre-referral interventions, teachers' awareness of the process of language acquisition and assessment techniques which address information processing and problem solving strategies.

A direction for the future will be to try compare the Adams model of special education assessment with models used by other immersion schools in Minnesota. The challenge is to develop a more complete assessment model, which uses better verbal tools in the cognitive realm, while remaining sensitive to the unique situation of the immersion student. It would also be useful to develop academic norms for the secondary level. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate the issue of school related stress, or to identify other factors that may be typical of students in the immersion setting.

The first cohort of students, including several special education students, graduated from high school last year and the program continues to flourish.

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Websites of interest:

Saint Paul Public Schools (www.spps.org)

Educational Resources Information Center (www.accesseric.org:81/)

ERIC Clearing House on Languages and Linguistics, Immersion Directory (www.cal.org/ericcll/immersion)